



Silk Road Travelers

BY JAMES DEUTSCH AND STEPHEN KIDD

While the vast majority of connections along the Silk Road were made through countless anonymous journeys, several historical travelers have become famous for the scope of their discoveries and their impact on Silk Road cultures.

As China participated in Silk Road trade during the 7th century with the expansion of the Tang dynasty from its seat in Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the journeys of one traveler helped to alter the religious beliefs of the Tang leadership. A Buddhist monk, Xuanzang left Chang'an around 629 c.e. in search of greater understanding of Buddhist religious texts that had been brought to China from Tibet and India centuries earlier. Xuanzang's quest took him to the Buddhist center of Dunhuang in western China, across the Takla Makan Desert to the great Central Asian cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, and then through present-day Pakistan to the source of Buddhism in India. In

India he studied the most difficult Buddhist texts, which he translated into Chinese and brought back to Chang'an around 645. On his return, he persuaded Chinese elites to embrace Buddhism.

An even more renowned traveler, whose name is familiar to any American child who has ever played the hide-and-seek game of "Marco Polo," is the legendary Venetian merchant who may have been the first to travel the entire Silk Road from Italy in the west to China in the east. Marco Polo (1254-1324) was more than a treasure-seeking trader; he claimed to have lived in China for 17 years, primarily in the court of Kublai Khan, acquiring knowledge that was instrumental in promoting the cultural exchange of ideas and commodities. His detailed travel accounts — compiled during the last 20 years of his life — were carefully studied (albeit sometimes skeptically) by generations of cartographers, merchants, explorers, and general readers who yearned to better



comprehend their world.

One year after Marco Polo's death, Muhammad Ibn Batuta (1304–1368?) left his native Morocco to make the customary Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. Ibn Batuta could not have known then, however, that he would spend the next 24 years continually traveling throughout Asia (particularly China and India), Africa, and the Middle East, before returning to Morocco in 1349. During this time, he recorded everything that intrigued him: from political and economic conditions to variations in human anatomy. Like Marco Polo, Ibn Batuta's reputation rests largely on the published account of his travels (ca. 1354), which served not only to illuminate the depth and diversity of human culture, but also to expand the limited horizons of the medieval European world.

In our own time, when the countries of the Silk Road can be traversed in a single day, there is another traveler who has begun to

explore the complexity of the Silk Road. Tracing the roots of European classical instruments to Asia, cellist Yo-Yo Ma was inspired by the cultural connections made as diverse peoples met along the Silk Road. In 1998 he founded the Silk Road Project to celebrate and foster the traditional cultures found along the ancient trade route. Today, fulfilling this mission, the Project's Silk Road Ensemble crosses the globe performing both traditional works from Silk Road cultures and new commissions from composers who hail from Silk Road countries. In an era of supersonic journeys, Yo-Yo Ma travels in search of lasting cultural connections.

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